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IDEALS, EDUCATION, AND HAPPY FLOURISHING

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ABSTRACT. In this essay, Doret J. de Ruyter defends the claim that parents as well as professional educators need to impart ideals to children in order to realize their wish that children become happy and flourishing adults. The argument consists of two parts. First, de Ruyter shows how ideals are important to construing the meaning of objective goods. Second, she contends that educating children with ideals is important to motivating them to strive for something higher or better. De Ruyter's analysis rests on two key concepts: "ideals," which refer to things one believes to be superb, excellent, or perfect, but that are as yet unrealized, and "happy flourishing," which describes the fulfillment of objectively identifiable generic goods and the person's satisfactory meaningful interpretation of these goods.

INTRODUCTION

In many Western countries adults complain that young people are apathetic when it comes to their involvement in greater moral issues. They are said to be focused only on themselves or their inner circle and primarily interested in material acquisitions. I do not know if this is true in every respect. Of course, many young people wish to have things their parents could not dream of having themselves, but there are also many who do show interest in charitable work and who participate in discussions to resolve the societal problems that face or are caused by their peers. Some observers also argue that parents as well as professional educators have become uncertain as to which values and ideals they may impart to children. The fall of the grand narratives has resulted in a fragmentation of value systems in Western societies. This "value gap," as Roy Baumeister and Mark Muraven have called the loss of the dominant value system, has led to new and more immediate quests for meaning in life.[1] The seemingly dominant way in which people find meaning and identity is through consumer products. George Ritzer argues, for instance, that one reason for the success of a chain like McDonald's is the fact that it is predictable. This may be an advantage: "in a rapidly changing, unfamiliar, and seemingly hostile world, the comparatively stable, familiar, and safe environment of a McDonaldized system offers comfort."[2] If this is true for parents and professional educators, it should not surprise adults that children and young people follow this lead.

My aim in this article is not to discuss the veracity of claims such as these, but to put forward the claim that parents as well as professional educators need to impart ideals to children. My main argument is that raising children with ideals is consistent with — in fact, necessary for — the goal of educators to help children

1. Roy F. Baumeister and Mark Muraven, "Identity as Adaptation to Social, Cultural, and Historical Context," *Journal of Adolescence* 19, no. 5 (1996): 405–416.

2. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 2000), 16.

become happy and flourishing adults. Before I embark on the task of developing this link, I will elucidate my conceptions of "ideals," "happiness," and "flourishing." I conclude with a concise description of the primary responsibilities of parents and teachers with regard to transmitting ideals to children.

IDEALS

The concept "ideals" refers to situations or characteristics of a person that a person believes to be superb, excellent, or perfect, and that have not as yet been realized, at least not in the life of the person who holds the ideal. From this description we can distill four necessary conditions of "ideals": (1) they refer to ideas that a person believes to be excellent or perfect, (2) the person must attach high value to these ideas, (3) they are (still) part of the person's dream or imagination, and (4) they are not easily achievable and may even be impossible to achieve, for they refer to states of the highest quality.[3] All four aspects must apply for something to be appropriately called an "ideal." Persons can value many things very highly, but these can be quite ordinary or common and, even in the person's own view, not representative of excellence. Equally, persons cherish things that are already present in their lives and are thus related to accomplished realities instead of ideals. Finally, a person can agree with someone else about something representing excellence without personally attaching high value to that "excellent" characteristic or situation. In such a case, the person does not share the ideal.

The first characteristic of ideals — that is, that they refer to excellence or perfection — seems necessarily to lead to the conclusion that ideals are unrealizable. For instance, Nicholas Rescher contends that an ideal refers to "a perfect, complete, definitive instance of its type — a very model or paradigm that answers to the purposes at issue in a way that is flawless and incapable of being improved upon."[4] In our imperfect world, unqualified perfections — both in terms of perfect situations and in terms of ideal characteristics of persons, such as being generous, just, courageous, or conscientious — are impossible to realize completely. This does not exclude the possibility that persons can show these traits of character on many occasions, but to do so all the time seems beyond our human capacities. And when certain people have been able to develop one of these aspects to a degree of perfection, we call them saints, heroes, or exceptional.[5] Another reason commonly

3. This conception suggests that ideals do not have an objective status, that is, they only exist if a person claims to have them. However, this does not exclude the possibility of having a rational discussion about ideals, for instance, debating whether or not the ideals of a person do indeed refer to excellence. Thus, ideals are not subjective in the sense that they are based on taste or mere preference.

4. Nicholas Rescher, *Ethical Idealism: An Inquiry into the Nature and Function of Ideals* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1987), 117.

5. John Kekes, *The Art of Life* (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 2001). The difference between achievable excellent situations and unachievable excellent traits of character is possibly the reason Kekes uses the term "ideal" only for the latter ones and refers to the former as "personal projects."

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given for the unrealizability of ideals is that they are too vague or multifaceted and therefore always leave open aspects that are not realized — that is, new aspects will be discovered the moment others have become reality. As a result, the ideal in all its aspects will never be completely attainable.[6] Wibren Van der Burg argues, for instance, that the ideal of democracy has dimensions of which we will only be aware once (parts of) the ideal as we now perceive it have been achieved.[7] We may think that we will be able to realize the ideal, but the moment we believe that we have done so, other or new aspects that must be realized in order to establish an ideal democracy will come to light.

While it is true that perfection cannot be realized, in common usage it is not considered incorrect to apply the term ''ideal'' to states that are realizable. If someone says that her ideal is to become the best violin player in the world, to break Martina Navratilova's record in tennis matches won, or to have earned sufficient money to take a year's holiday and tour the world, no one would say to her that she should not use the term ''ideal'' for these goals because it is reserved for unrealizable visions. Rescher acknowledges this use of the term and posits a distinction between full-scale ideals, which are unrealizable, and mini-ideals, which refer to something that is ''as perfect as we can realistically expect to find.''[8] I agree with Rescher that there is a distinction to be made between ideals that are, in principle, unrealizable and those that can be achieved, but I prefer to use the terms ultimate ideals versus common ideals. Common ideals refer to those unrealized values a person believes to be excellent and that he or she highly appreciates. These ideals can be realized because they are not flawless in their very nature but, rather, the best a person can imagine achieving in his or her lifetime (in the short or long term). I call these ''common'' because in common parlance it is appropriate to apply the term ideals to states that are excellent but not perfect, whereas in philosophy ''ideals'' tend to be used to refer to perfections only. Additionally, common ideals refer to things on a common scale that can be realized by the average person. Finally, these ideals are of a concrete nature and thus one is able to establish whether or not one has realized the ideal. This does not mean that common ideals are less important to a person. However, while one person or even many people may consider them to be excellent, these ideals cannot be perfect. Furthermore, people must excel in order to achieve and maintain these ideal situations or characteristics, but they do not have to achieve perfection.

Happiness or Flourishing?

In both philosophy and psychology, there are two traditions with regard to the conceptualization of happiness, well-being, or flourishing: objective theories, which are called eudaimonic theories within psychology, and subjective theories,

6. Dorothy Emmet, *The Role of the Unrealizable: A Study in Regulative Ideals* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). See also Rescher, *Ethical Idealism,* 117.

7. Wibren Van der Burg, *De verbeelding aan het werk. Pleidooi voor een realistisch idealisme* [Imagination at work: A plea for realistic idealism] (Kampen: Agora, 2001).

8. Rescher, *Ethical Idealism,* 116.

which psychologists know by the name of hedonistic theories or research into subjective well-being.[9] Here I will give a concise description of these traditions, but I will not delve deeply into all the particular conceptions that have been developed on human happiness or flourishing. The analytic distinction is, in my view, sufficient to address the question posed by this article. Additionally, although there is a distinction to be made between conceptions of the meaning of "flourishing" and "happiness," on the one hand, and the ways in which people can achieve such states, on the other, these two issues are also intertwined.[10] Finally, both terms can be used to describe the quality of a person's life over a period of time or to evaluate a person's life overall as well as for particular periods in which we believe the person is flourishing or happy. In this article I will mainly focus on describing the quality of life in the first sense. The main difference between the overall and time-slice evaluation seems to lie in the aspects that are taken into consideration. Whereas the time-slice approach primarily takes into account the positive emotions, either in terms of a joyous state or in terms of a feeling of satisfaction with oneself or one's accomplishments, the overall approach also, or only, takes into consideration aspects such as the quality of the accomplishments and the domains in which these are achieved.

Objective theories argue that we can objectively identify characteristics of human flourishing independent from a person's (emotional) endorsement of what this entails. On this view, whether or not a person likes the goods, wants them, or values them is irrelevant to the judgment that the goods are conducive to a person's flourishing.[11] The goods are intrinsically good. Items on the objective lists are related to characteristics of human beings or to their biological characteristics, for instance health and physical pursuits, friendship/social relations, safety, intellectual development, creative development, and freedom.[12] Within psychology, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci is currently one of the most influential theories within the eudaimonic tradition. The central concept in the eudaimonic tradition is self-realization, self-fulfillment, or self-actualization,[13] and the SDT aims to clarify what it means to actualize or

9. See, for example, David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Discovering the Pathway to Fulfillment, Well-Being, and Enduring Personal Joy* (1992; repr. New York: Quill, 2002); and David Lykken, *The Nature of Happiness (*New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

10. For instance, in contrast to the dominant debate about the plausibility of the two traditions, which concentrates on the difference in their conceptions of "happiness" or "flourishing," Richard Kraut maintains that it is not so much the *meaning* of happiness that underlies the difference between the traditions but their view on how happiness is achieved. Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *The Philosophical Review* 88, no. 2 (1979): 167–197.

11. See, for example, Richard J. Arneson, "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction," in *Human Flourishing,* eds. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

12. See, for example, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1985); Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

13. Alan S. Waterman, "Two Conceptions of Happiness: Contrasts of Personal Expressiveness (Eudaimonia) and Hedonic Enjoyment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 64, no. 4 (1993): 678–691.

realize the self and how that can be accomplished.[14] Ryan and Deci argue that there are three innate psychological needs or nutriments that are functionally essential to a person's flourishing: (1) the need for autonomy or self-determination, (2) the need for competence or effectiveness, and (3) the need for relatedness or affiliation.

According to a subjective interpretation of human well-being, humans thrive if and only if they themselves feel or know that they do — that is, humans are happy if they believe they are, and only when they believe they are happy do they experience well-being. This can be interpreted as a hedonistic view of human happiness, or, in other words, as having a particular state of mind (being exhilarated or deeply satisfied, for instance) irrespective of what one has these positive feelings about.[15] One subjective theory in which human well-being does not have these hedonistic connotations is the informed desire theory. There are two key characteristics of this theory. The first is that people will flourish if they fulfill the desires that benefit their well-being. Which desires do so is not obvious and, therefore, in contrast to the actual desire theory, the informed desire theory argues that people's flourishing is enhanced if they reflect on the desire and rank their desires in order of preference. The second characteristic is that the desires include longings that are not related to an appetitive state or whose fulfillment does not give psychological satisfaction.[16] For instance, the desire of parents to look after their chronically ill child and give up their prospects for a career or a flourishing social life may contribute to their well-being, although it does not make them particularly overjoyed.

I propose, and have defended elsewhere, a theory of human well-being that combines the two traditions.[17] A combined theory has both objective and person-related aspects. It is objective in that it claims that human flourishing requires particular goods and characteristics, among which are the goods of health, social relations, and safety, as well as intellectual, creative, and physical pursuits — all goods that we can objectively establish to be essential to human flourishing. However, the idea that well-being can exist independent of the perspective of an agent, that it does not require the acknowledgment of a person that he or she flourishes, does not conform to my linguistic or psychological intuition. I do not believe that we use the concept of well-being accurately if a person does not share that evaluation. Therefore, we also need subjective aspects, and I suggest that there are two of these, both of which are related to the claim that there are goods that are good for all human beings but not necessarily good for all in the same way. As Richard Kraut observes, for instance, objectivists

14. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, ''On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being,'' *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 146.

15. This was defended by Epicurus, for instance, and somewhat more recently by Henry Sidgwick, although Robert Adams questions whether or not Sidgwick fully agrees with his own theory. See Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

16. James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

17. Doret J. de Ruyter, ''Pottering in the Garden: On Human Flourishing and Education,'' *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52, no. 4 (2004): 377–389.

> might believe that for each of us there is a large class of ideal lives, and that to be happy we have to come reasonably close to one of those lives. And an objectivist can also say that different types of individuals have different capacities, so that what is ideal for one person may not be ideal for another.[18]

This brings us to the agent-relative aspects of flourishing or happiness. The objectively identifiable goods are so general that they are in themselves not sufficient to help a person lead a flourishing life. The person has to construct his or her own interpretation of the goods, which is one that he or she values and finds worthwhile and that, when fulfilled, will be satisfactory to him or her. To take an example, while Sister Anne flourishes by having a spiritual relationship with God, her parents thrived by having a long-term commitment to each other, and her sister prospers by not having an exclusive relationship at all. Thus, although there are objectively identifiable goods, human flourishing is personal and diverse because there are many ways in which people can interpret and combine the diverse generic goods.[19] Although this first aspect is agent-related, it can be brought under the objective theory as well, as Kraut indicates, and therefore does not as yet make the proposal a combined theory of well-being. The second agent-related aspect does. In addition to the personal interpretation of the objective goods, a person needs to be satisfied with this interpretation as well as with the actions or the life path to which this interpretation leads him or her.

To conclude, I believe that human well-being consists of two aspects: the fulfillment of generic goods that are objectively identifiable and the meaningful interpretation of these goods by the individual in a way that is personally satisfactory. For this conception I will use the term happy flourishing. Admittedly, this is an ugly combination, but it best expresses what I have in mind. I should note that this proposal is not in any way unique or even original. James Griffin also claims that his theory is both objective and subjective, and he proposes abandoning the distinction altogether. John Kekes also recommends a combination of objective and subjective aspects, suggesting that the standards are ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective.[20] And, finally, my proposal is similar to those put forth by the philosopher Douglas Rasmussen and the sociologist of happiness Ruut Veenhoven.[21]

WHY RAISING CHILDREN WITH IDEALS HELPS THEM BECOME HAPPY FLOURISHING ADULTS

My premise is that parents wish the best for their children. In my view this means that parents ought to hope that their children will lead lives in which they are able to give a meaningful interpretation to objective goods, aspire to achieve them, and that the interpretation and ways of pursuing are satisfactory to them. In this sense I agree with Raymond Belliotti, who argues that

18. Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *The Philosophical Review* 88, no. 2 (1979): 181.

19. See also Griffin, *Well-Being*, 54, 55.

20. John Kekes, "Happiness," *Mind* 91, no. 363 (1982): 358–372.

21. See, for example, Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature," in *Human Flourishing,* eds. Paul et al; and Ruut Veenhoven, "The Four Qualities of Life: Ordering Concepts and Measures of the Good Life," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000): 1–39.

> Happiness remains valuable, but it is not the most important human aspiration. We should teach our children how to lead robustly meaningful, valuable lives. If they do, they will deserve worthwhile happiness and often realize it. But even if they are not predominantly happy, they will have fought the good fight, fashioned in a worthwhile biography, and added value to the world.[22]

The best that parents can do for their children, therefore, is to offer them their own best interpretation of the objective goods, because parents do not know what kind of people their children will develop into and what will make them happy flourishing adults. The argument for my claim consists of two parts: I will first show why ideals are important to construing the meaning of objective goods. Second, I will establish that ideals motivate people to strive for something higher or better.

The Importance of Having Regulative Ideals

The generic goods are general and open to many conceptions; given this, people must develop their own concrete interpretation of these goods in order to flourish and be happy. For this, they need guideposts or values. An approach to this issue that I have come to find sympathetic is Joseph Raz's theory of values. Raz has developed a social dependence thesis, which consists of two elements:

> The special social dependence thesis claims that some values exist only if there are (or were) social practices sustaining them. The (general) social dependence thesis claims that, with some exceptions, all values depend on social practices either by being subject to the special thesis or through their dependence on values that are subject to the special thesis.[23]

The social dependence thesis leads to value pluralism, but not to relativism: the ground for saying that an action or object is good is relative to a particular genre, but this verdict is unrestricted, that is, it is absolute. I can say that a restaurant is good because it has three stars in the Michelin Guide, which ensures excellent service and exquisite food, or that a restaurant is good because it is inexpensive, it serves decent meals, and the service is quick. Both are good absolutely but in different ways. This allows us to say without contradiction that works of art or social arrangements that are completely different are equally good.

But why would ideals be important in this context? The reason for this is that there are diverse ways in which one can give meaning to the goods. To use Raz's terms, the goods have different genres that can all be good. These genres have different standards, but they are similar in the fact that they all have levels. If one has a clear idea about what is best within a genre — what would count as excellence — one is able to evaluate current practices or alternative practices against these supreme standards. Ideas or images of, for instance, the trustworthy friend, the reliable colleague, the harmonious family, or the just society function as regulative ideals, and they may assist people in evaluating what actions or behaviors they should undertake, or what they should change in order to achieve these ideal standards.[24]

22. Raymond A. Belliotti, *Happiness Is Overrated* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 96–97.

23. Joseph Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

24. Emmet, *The Role of the Unrealizable*.

Which genre will be good for children is something they have to discover themselves, but what makes their actions within this genre good is something that educators can teach them. As John White recently argued,

> Children's education in this area should induct them into the goods themselves; but it should also lead them into a reflective appreciation of the nature of these goods, their provenance, historical development and variety. Only in this way can they, too, become members of the class of reliable judges about the nature of personal well-being and its values.[25]

Finally, even though it is impossible to bring all the diverse goods to perfection, educators should introduce children to ideal images within the diverse genres of the goods because they do not know which ideals or genres will contribute to their happy flourishing as adults.[26] If educators were to select ideals for the children, or if they were to impose the ways in which children balance their pursuit of ideals, they would be more likely to hamper than to facilitate children's development into happily flourishing adults.

But how, one may ask, can the pursuit of ideals be conducive to happy flourishing if many or maybe most of them can never be realized? Is it even rational to pursue the unrealizable? It is obvious that the answer is different for common ideals, which may be realizable, and ultimate ideals, which are not realizable. Since the unrealizability of ultimate ideals poses a challenge to the rationality of pursuing them, I will discuss these ideals only.

According to Rescher, it is not necessary to see a goal as something that is attainable; the fact that a goal may not be attainable does not imply that one cannot pursue it.[27] Moreover, it is not irrational to make an attempt; it would only be irrational if one were to believe that it was possible to achieve it. He offers a couple of arguments to support his claim that pursuing ideals is rational, even when the person knows that the ideal can never be realized. The first is that by pursuing the ideal, the actor will achieve aims that can only be realized through pursuing the impossible. The second is a psychological one: by aiming high, one will achieve more than by pursuing a realizable goal. In other words, the more one attempts to achieve, the better one will actually perform.

With regard to the first argument, it is important to investigate the reason a person gives for pursuing the unattainable ideal, for I think that Rescher may not be right in every case. We can use the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goods, on the one hand, and internal and external goods, on the other, to argue where he is and is not correct. If the person pursues an ideal such as peace on earth in order to gain esteem or to create a social environment in which he or she feels at home, and if these latter aims are the primary reasons for pursuing the ideal, we could say that the ideal the person claims to have is not his or her genuine ideal,

25. John White, "Educating for Success," in *Idealen, Idolen en Iconen van de Pedagogiek* [Ideals, idols and icons in education], eds. Doret J. de Ruyter, Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost, and Stijn M.A. Sieckelinck (Amsterdam: SWP, 2005), 268.

26. This does not mean that these ideals refer to excellent situations or personal characteristics that are ego-focused. Living in an ideal society, for instance, is also important for happy flourishing.

27. Rescher, *Ethical Idealism*, 6–16.

but, rather, the person is actually pursuing fame or personal well-being. In such a case, the acclaimed ideal is instrumental with respect to the person's intrinsic goods.[28] However, in distinguishing between internal and external goods, it is possible to argue that the actor does in fact pursue the ideal because he or she values what the ideal refers to (internal goods), but in doing so also achieves other aims (external goods) as byproducts.[29] In this case, we can correctly say that the person is pursuing his or her ideals. Achieving external goods while pursuing an ideal does not turn the ideal into an instrumental value because these external goods are attained only when the person pursues the ideal for its intrinsic value.

Rescher's second argument is more convincing. It seems plausible that people who strive for the best will perform better than people who aim for the average, although, as Barry Schwartz et al. have observed, there is no empirical research that supports this point: "Presumably, not being satisfied with 'good enough' spurs one on to achievements that less ambitious people will not attain, though there is as yet no evidence on this point."[30] But even they suggest that there are advantages to adopting a maximizing strategy, precisely because of the intuitive plausibility of the idea that striving for more will take one further. This brings me to the second part of my argument.

Ideals Motivate Us to Aim for the Best

Ideals motivate people to strive for something higher or better than they might otherwise attempt.[31] Ideals can stimulate people to strive for a better life, a better society.[32] This seems to be a worthy educational aim, but is it?

Maximizers can be described as people who strive for the best in all situations. They want to choose the best option, to fulfill their desire in the most optimal way, or to develop themselves in the best possible way. Satisficers, on the other hand, settle for good enough. It seems quite clear that the pursuit of ideals requires maximizing strategies or behaviors. In making choices that affect one's ability to achieve the ideal, the pursuer will choose the best available option.[33]

28. Of course, it is also possible that a person explicitly pursues an ideal such as being rich or famous and perceives these ideals as instrumental only.

29. For the argument that happiness or flourishing are themselves byproducts, see, for example, Jon Elster, "States that Are Essentially By-products," *Social Science Information* 20, no. 3 (1981): 431–473; Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness* (London: Rider, 1992); and Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946; repr. New York: Washington Square Press, 1985).

30. Barry Schwartz, Andrew Ward, Sonja Lyubomirsky, John Monterosso, Katherine White, and Darrin R. Lehman, "Maximizing Versus Satisficing: Happiness Is a Matter of Choice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 5 (2002): 1194.

31. See also Rescher, *Ethical Idealism*.

32. See, for example, Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

33. It may seem as if such people are not maximizers overall, because they may settle for something good enough in situations that do not bear upon their ideals. It is, however, arguable that they choose to do so, because they realize that if they were to opt for a maximizing strategy in these circumstances, they would not have the time and energy to pursue their ideals. Such decisions are, of course, to be interpreted as a maximizing strategy overall.

Michael Slote questions the desirability of this approach, instead arguing in favor of a conception of individual moderation, which he perceives to be "an admirable tendency, a form of virtue."[34] Moderate individuals do not deny themselves all pleasures or the satisfaction of all desires, but they have definite (though subjective) limits to which they will go. On this reasoning, people may aspire or ask for less than they can get out of the belief that this ultimately serves their best interests. In such cases, people are seeking what is best for them personally by taking the path of moderation, but they do not aspire to moderation. Slote has no quarrel with this, but argues that there can also be situations in which one opts for less than is possible without such justifications. He offers two reasons as to why satisficing moderation is praiseworthy or, rather, why a maximizing approach is problematic. First, the optimizer needs to discover all available options and weigh these against each other, which, according to Slote, "has an unspontaneous and constrained aspect, and we to some extent feel sorry for, think less well of someone lacking in spontaneity and constrained in his behaviour."[35] Second, such a person appears needy and lacking in self-sufficiency because of "his tendency to eke out the most or best he can in every situation."[36]

Could not Slote's conception be an accurate characterization of the maximizer? Is not a person who aspires to be as virtuous as possible a maximizer? This may seem counterintuitive, but if so, this would be caused by the fact that the notion of the maximizer has been primarily developed in the domain of economics. Although Slote does widen this interpretation, his discussion remains too exclusively centered on prudential strategies (that is, those in which a person aims to fulfill his or her own desires in the utmost way) whereas it should incorporate a person's moral characteristics as well.

Conceptualizing a maximizer as someone who tries to develop him- or herself in the best possible way seems difficult to reject or criticize, at least when "best" includes one's moral dispositions. What educator would not aim for such an optimal development, particularly when it concerns the moral dispositions of a person? At least one philosopher has written a well-known objection to this, of course, Susan Wolf. She argues that "moral perfection in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive."[37] Some of her main arguments are that moral saints are too good for their own well-being, that such people are so focused on moral issues that other important nonmoral capacities cannot be developed, and that such people may be dim-witted or bland.[38] She also argues that to be so passionate about morality that one sacrifices

34. Michael Slote, "On Seeking Less Than the Best," in *Philosophical Issues in Moral Education and Development*, eds. Ben Spiecker and Roger Straughan (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 65.

35. Ibid., 71.

36. Ibid., 72

37. Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 419.

38. Ibid., 421, 422.

everything else for it (one's other talents, for instance) seems misguided: "The way in which morality, unlike other possible goals, is apt to dominate is particularly disturbing, for it seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self."[39] Wolf's proposal, which she calls *the point of view of individual perfection*, implies that "the moral worth of an individual's relation to his world will [likewise] have some, but limited, value — for, as I have argued, the (perfectionist) goodness of an individual's life does not vary proportionally with the degree to which it exemplifies moral goodness."[40] She does not deny the importance of morality but questions whether becoming a moral saint is a worthy ideal, because we value people's nonmoral characteristics as well and, in the case of moral saints, these are necessarily seen as inferior.

I agree with Wolf that the world would not be an interesting place if, for instance, intellectual or aesthetic values were not able to flourish due to the overriding importance attached to moral values. Therefore, educating children to become maximizers should involve maximizing all their capacities. Since this will include the moral ones as well, the world will definitely be a better place. In this case, the maximization does not focus on the individual aspects or separate characteristics of a person, but on the overall balance of them.[41] Of course, this was implied previously by my suggestion that happy flourishing requires that one pursue the ideal in several objective goods. This does not mean that all aspects or characteristics should be developed to an equal level; the balance must depend upon a person's capacities and will therefore be different for everyone. It does imply, however, that aspects cannot be neglected. Even though children with particular talents (in music, science, or sports, for example) must spend a lot of time and energy in developing related capacities and dispositions, other values (such as friendship) and dispositions (such as intellectual curiosity or friendliness) should not be neglected.

Some Final Words on the Role of Parents and Teachers

I have already alluded to the roles of parents and teachers at several points in this article, but I think it is important to bring these together in a description of the main responsibilities of parents and teachers with regard to helping their children/students develop into adults who pursue ideals.

One might expect that parents already offer ideals of the goods that are conducive to the flourishing of their children and also pursue these ideals themselves. We may presuppose that parents normally do so, but this should not be too readily assumed, for even in cases of less ideal interpretations of the good, many parents may find it difficult to be a good example for their children. For instance, pursuing a healthy life style would imply that adults give up smoking when they have children, that they eat healthy food and give the same to their children, that they

39. Ibid., 424.

40. Ibid., 437.

41. See also Rescher, *Ethical Idealism*.

exercise and take their children along, and so forth. But, as we know, this is not always the case.

Even more important is that parents assist children to become practically wise adults who are able to formulate and pursue their ideal of the goods and are able to balance their ideals. Being wise assumes more than being intelligent or knowledgeable. A "practically wise" person can "deliberate finely about what is good and beneficial for himself, not about some restricted area — e.g. about what promotes health or strength — but what promotes living well in general."[42] A practically wise person is not only a knowledgeable person, but also someone who is attached to what she understands to be good, right, or true, and has the will to act upon her insights. Again, with regard to the good of health, a practically wise person will be a modest or frugal person. He will think about his diet carefully — not only with regard to his own health, but also in relation to ecological and socioeconomic issues (how food is produced, by whom it is produced). This responsibility may be even more challenging for a lot of parents than imparting their ideals, but it is something they have to aspire to do if they take their wish for the future of their children seriously.

Finally, parents ought to give children the freedom to explore which ideal conceptions of the goods will allow them to become happy flourishing adults, which implies increasing the freedom and autonomy they afford their children. If parents aim to ensure that their children adopt the way of life or conception of the good that contributes to the *parents'* happy flourishing, they not only hinder their children's development into practically wise adults (by forcing them to act on the parents' insights, rather than their own), but they also diminish the likelihood that their children will flourish and be happy, because they push them to live a life that has been good for others (the parents) but that is not necessarily good for them. However, it may be too much to ask that parents be able to offer alternative ideals to their children, which brings me to the responsibility of teachers.

A preliminary question with regard to teachers' responsibility is whether or not they are allowed to offer ideals to pupils in the first place, since ideals are part of a conception of the good life and there is considerable debate over whether teachers, particularly those who work in public schools and are thus representatives of the state, are allowed to educate children within or into a particular conception of the good life. Although no one believes in the possibility of neutral education, acknowledging this is very different from advocating that teachers should induct students into a particular conception of the good life. I want to defend the position that teachers should offer such instruction, even if their conception of the good life differs from the one the students' parents would impart. In this essay I cannot develop a full political-philosophical account with regard to parental rights and the degree of freedom granted to teachers, but I do not believe that it is necessary to develop such an analysis. There are two reasons for claiming that teachers have this responsibility, both of which bear on the interests of

42. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a 25–30.

children and, in most countries, on their legal rights as laid down in the International Convention on Children's Rights.[43] First, since states cannot be certain that all children are raised with ideals, and since ideals in education are necessary for children to be able to flourish, they need to offer them to children, for states have a responsibility to provide education that serves the interests of children. This is particularly important in deprived areas where it is not uncommon for parents to have lost all faith in the possibility to achieve excellence in life.[44] Second, states cannot be certain that all children are raised with the ideals that are good for them. Since states have no good reason to intervene in families when parents are falling short in offering ideals that are good for their children (as intervention in families is only justified in liberal democracies when parents do not fulfill their minimal duties), the states must work through the public schools. Teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to present to their students many diverse ideals, that is, many ideals within the possible genres of the objective goods. This approach allows students to explore which of these ideals they wish to pursue themselves. As Harry Brighouse has, in my view, convincingly argued, schools need to be discontinuous in their values from both the students' families as well as mainstream society, because "all students have a compelling interest in being able to become an autonomous, self-governing person."[45] This, in turn, is conducive to their development into happy flourishing adults.

If parents and teachers are able to meet the responsibilities described here, they will be acting in accord with their hope that children will become happy flourishing adults. Of course, there is no guarantee that these children will become happy and will flourish — any number of circumstances may prevent them from doing so. But I think we may go so far as to claim that, with ideals as a key component of their educational baggage, children will have a good chance to flourish and be happy in situations that are not particularly favorable to achieving this.

43. The countries excepted from these legal protections are the United States of America and Somalia.

44. The New York Times bestseller *Random Family*, by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc (New York: Scribner, 2003), offers a "good" example of this problem.

45. Harry Brighouse, "Channel One, the Anti-Commercial Principle, and the Discontinuous Ethos," *Educational Policy* 19, no. 3 (2005): 528–549.

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